TESTA: Supporting Review and Enhancement of Assessment of Taught Provision

Context

The new Learning & Teaching Enabling Strategy for the University emphasises the need to reflect on current practices and identify opportunities to enhance our curricula. It recognises that to achieve our vision, we must put in place mechanisms to enhance our curriculum review processes to ensure our programmes and systems of assessment produce the types of graduates and student experiences we desire. Any mechanism introduced must be robust, enhancement-focused and align with the strategic direction captured within the following sub-aims:

Sub Aim 1.1 We will regularly review and reflect on the structure, content and enhancement of our taught programmes at all levels to make sure that they meet the needs of current and future graduates, the demands of the professions, and the requirements for employment and life in a global society.

Sub Aim 2.1 We will enhance our learning and teaching approaches and practices through rigorous and appropriate assessment and feedback systems, recognising that these areas are the most likely to make a significant difference to the success of our graduates and to their satisfaction with the student experience.

Background

The University of Dundee ranks highly on the basis of overall student experience, however instruments such as the National Student Survey (NSS) have consistently indicated that our students are notably less positive in relation to assessment and feedback. Ascertaining a means to bring about strategic change in our assessment and feedback practice has represented an important area of work for the University. Participation in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) ‘Assessment and Feedback Change Programme’ in an evaluation of the Transforming the Experiences of Students through Assessment (TESTA) methodology was identified as a potential means to effect this change.

TESTA represents an evidence-based methodology which maps assessment at the programme level and triangulates this information with data relating to student study behaviour. The output is a case study which is shared with programme teams providing them with baseline data with which to consider interventions to address issues identified relating to assessment and feedback practice.

The project piloted use of the methodology with two degree programmes within the institution. The aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of the TESTA model as a potential component of our institutional quality assurance framework, aligned with programme review. Specifically, the project sought to establish the effectiveness of TESTA across different disciplinary contexts and modes of delivery and the scalability of the process.

Outcomes

The TESTA methodology was well received by both participating programme teams, with feedback describing the process as robust, positive and relevant. Importantly the process was not viewed as an additional burden or a duplication of existing regulatory processes. Specific comments highlighted the value of the approach as an evidence-based means to devise development plans in response to issues identified.

A case study produced for the Higher Education Academy providing further background information on the TESTA pilot is available in Appendix 1.
Proposal

Following consultation with DUSA, College Heads of Learning and Teaching, the Learning and Teaching Quality Forum and members of the SHEEC Working Group, Senate Learning and Teaching Committee are invited to support the following proposal:

1. The TESTA methodology should be implemented to support curriculum enhancement as a tool for use in periodic review at the earliest opportunity and before the start of academic year 2013/14. Earlier implementation may make feasible support for some of the 21 programmes (across 10 Schools) scheduled for review in academic year 2012/13.

2. Programme teams wishing to utilise TESTA should be supported in the application of the methodology. TESTA should be applied up to one year in advance of periodic review in order to aid reflections and the development of future learning and teaching plans.

3. Support for TESTA will be centrally managed by [insert Department] with a core development group established with a remit to aid the collection of data and presentation of findings to programme teams.

4. Membership of the development group may expand depending on the forward plan of programme reviews for an academic year. Membership will initially comprise members of the original project team, LLC Educational Development, College Heads of Learning and Teaching and School Heads of Learning and Teaching.

5. Role outlines will be devised for development group members with initial training provided by members of the Dundee project team with consultancy support from members of the original TESTA project team (University of Winchester). A mentoring approach will then be adopted for the training of future group members.

6. Resource will be required for the creation of a new post of Assessment Support Officer to be based within [insert Department]. This new role will be responsible for undertaking the core TESTA research activities across degree programmes. The post will be responsible to [insert individual/Department] and will work closely with programme leaders, programme teams and students. The post holder will require a good level of analytical skills and experience of working with both quantitative and qualitative data. An outline job description is presented in Appendix 2. An annual budget of £3000 will be required to fund transcription costs.

7. Where programme teams opt not to utilise TESTA as the means by which to review the systems of assessment across their programme, an alternative tool must be identified and its use justified.

8. Case studies produced as an outcome of the TESTA process should be analysed to facilitate continued development of our institutional quality assurance and enhancement strategies. A report on recurring themes/issues should be provided to the Learning and Teaching Quality Forum, Learning and Teaching Committee and Educational Development for consideration.

9. Programme teams will be required to feedback to students the main findings to emerge from TESTA and how these are to be addressed.

10. The availability of TESTA, and rationale underpinning the approach, will be communicated to Deans, School Heads of Learning and Teaching, College Quality Assurance Leads, DUSA all academic staff via the Highlighter newsletter and briefings to the Student Representative Council (SRC).
Benefits

Implementation of TESTA represents an opportunity to deliver systemic change in our approach to the assurance and enhancement of assessment and feedback practices across the institution. Specific benefits include:

- A supported approach to the collection, presentation and interpretation of data on programme assessment environments enabling programme teams to plan evidence-informed interventions to address programme-specific issues.
- Opportunity to engage students in enhancement processes around assessment and feedback and to demonstrate reflexivity and appropriate responses to feedback.
- Scope to identify recurring issues across the institution relating to assessment and feedback which can be monitored by appropriate bodies e.g. Senate Learning and Teaching Committee and used by Educational Development to inform staff development provision.
- Enhanced assessment literacy among academic staff will lead to more effective and efficient approaches to assessment and feedback across degree programmes.
- Opportunity to identify and share examples of good practice in assessment, feedback and curriculum design across the University.

Implications of not Undertaking Proposal

This proposal presents a means to both facilitate reflection on the structure and content of our programmes and enhance our systems of assessment across Schools and disciplines. Failure to undertake this this proposal will significantly restrict our ability to improve the student experience of assessment and feedback and our reputation in this area as measured by instruments such as the National Student Survey.

Risks

The following risks have been identified:

- Failure to obtain resource for a new post to support the research and development activities associated with TESTA would significantly restrict ability to support the full range of programmes scheduled for review on an annual basis and threaten the sustainability of the proposal.
- Problems in recruiting individuals to the development group, or due to members leaving the development group, would reduce capacity to support data collection and presentation of findings presented at the hand over meeting with programme teams. This latter risk may be mitigated by identifying and training alternative staff and ensuring working practices are documented allowing seamless handover. New development group members would participate in a shadowing period with experienced team members.
- A lack of ‘buy in’ by programme teams represents a potential risk. The rationale behind the proposed implementation will need to be clearly communicated to academic staff and the enhancement-based nature of the approach emphasised.
- Central responsibility for the management of the process will be crucial to co-ordinate research activities and resource needs; discuss processes with degree programme leaders/teams; and analyse and communicate trends in findings to appropriate bodies e.g. Senate Learning and Teaching Committee.

Dr David Walker
30 October, 2012
Appendix 1

Case Study

In Focus: Evaluating TESTA as a Mechanism for Programme-level Enhancement in Assessment and Feedback
David Walker, Jonathan Baldwin, Lynn Boyle, David Coates and Anna Rzepczynski, University of Dundee

Overview
Improving approaches to assessment and feedback represents an important area of work for the University of Dundee, with the further development of our assessment practice an explicit aim of the University’s new Learning and Teaching Strategy. Participation in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) thematic ‘Assessment and Feedback Change Programme’ was identified as a potential enabler for positive change. This case study describes a pilot implementation of the Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) methodology – an approach which examines issues associated with assessment and feedback at the programme level as a means to focus curriculum thinking among programme teams. The evaluation of TESTA concentrated on its capacity to enhance existing institutional quality enhancement processes linked to programme review.

Aims and objectives
The aim of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of the TESTA methodology as a potential component of our institutional quality assurance framework, aligned with programme review. Specifically, the project sought to establish:

- the effectiveness of TESTA across different disciplinary contexts and modes of delivery;
- the scalability of the process;
- the resource requirements and support mechanisms that would need to be in place to ensure sustainability.

Approach and activities
Two courses were invited to participate in the pilot project. Research was conducted with the online, distance learning BA Childhood Practice and the studio-based BDEs (Hons) Textile Design degree programmes. These distinctive programmes were selected in order to establish the practicalities of applying the TESTA methodology in non-traditional course contexts (the original TESTA project led by the University of Winchester evidenced that it was applicable within traditional, on-campus delivered programmes). Throughout the project we have communicated with key stakeholders including the Dundee University Student Association (DUSA), providing updates on progress and inviting questions on the rationale behind the project.

Outcomes
The TESTA model was well received by the participating programme teams, with feedback describing the process as robust, positive and relevant. Importantly the process was not viewed as being burdensome or a duplication of existing regulatory processes. Specific comments highlighted the value of the approach as an evidence-based means to devise development plans in response to issues identified. The opportunity to discuss the findings – presented in the form of a case study - with the project team, and gain a greater understanding of student views in relation to assessment and feedback was also commended. An unexpected but welcome outcome of this process has been the instigation of discussion within one of the Schools involved in the pilot around the need for a mentoring system for early career academics.
Impact
The pilot initiative indicated that TESTA represents a robust process for examining diverse assessment environments at the programme level. The TESTA methodology does not in itself provide solutions to address issues in assessment practice resulting from programme design. Its value is as an evidence-based enabler for change – facilitating discussion, development and delivery of interventions to enhance the student experience of assessment and feedback.

Lessons learned
Time management is critical in the TESTA process. The project plan for each programme that engages with TESTA must allow sufficient time for student involvement, taking account of exam diets and holiday periods. Start-up meetings with programme teams are an important consultation stage in the process. In these meetings the enhancement-led approach adopted by TESTA can be emphasised, initial concerns addressed and the engagement of the programme team as partners in the process secured. The project benefited from the multidisciplinary representation within the project team which significantly enriched the concluding review meetings, drawing on a range of experience and expertise to inform the discussion.

Next steps
The project team will be meeting to review the results from the pilot with a view to developing a proposal for Senate Learning and Teaching Committee recommending that TESTA be adopted as part of our quality enhancement processes, representing an important enabler for achieving our strategic aim to further develop our assessment and feedback practices.

Key messages
Understanding the influence of programme-level assessment environments on student study behaviour and the overall student experience is fundamental to identifying where issues or pressure points are located. TESTA represents an effective method of mapping programme-level data and, if implemented as an enhancement-led initiative, can provide programme teams with valuable evidence to devise interventions to address issues and further develop practice.
Appendix 2

University of Dundee
[Department]

Job Description

Job Title: Assessment Support Officer - Grade 7
Job Category: Academic Related
Duration of Post: 
Location: [Department]
Responsible to: 

Purpose of Post:
This new post is responsible for working with [insert] to enhance the quality of taught provision delivered across the institution by supporting curriculum review processes.

The post holder will provide core development and research support for the Transforming the Student Experience through Assessment (TESTA) process supporting institutional processes linked to programme development and review. Working across Schools and degree programmes, the post will be expected to undertake mixed-methods research, using an established methodology to identify issues associated with assessment and feedback as a means to focus curriculum thinking among programme teams ahead of programme review.

Principal Duties:

- Working with programme teams, undertake mixed methods research following TESTA methodology to support programme re-approval.
- Write up results of research and produce case study reports to be shared with programme teams.
- Contribute to group meetings, providing information and data to members of the TESTA project team and relevant programme teams.
- Assist in the collection and dissemination of examples of good assessment practice, ensuring information is communicated to all relevant staff.
- Contribute to the production of dissemination materials in a variety of formats for different audiences.
- Coordinate the various strands of TESTA activities liaising with both programme teams and members of the TESTA development group.
- Ensure confidentiality of participant data gathered as part of research process.
- Establish and maintain effective working relationships with key areas of the university
Person Specification:

- Educated to degree level with experience of working in higher education.
- Good analytical skills with ability to interpret data and identify patterns.
- Experience of working with both quantitative and qualitative data.
- Ability to coordinate multiple phases of data collection with different programme teams.
- High level of written and oral communication skills.
- Able to produce and present clear and accurate reports.
- Ability to work to strict deadlines and to meet milestone targets, with detailed attention to time management and multitasking.
- Ability to work independently with minimal supervision, but also capable of operating as part of a team.
- Excellent knowledge of MS Office products, especially Word and Excel. Experience with SPSS is desirable.